

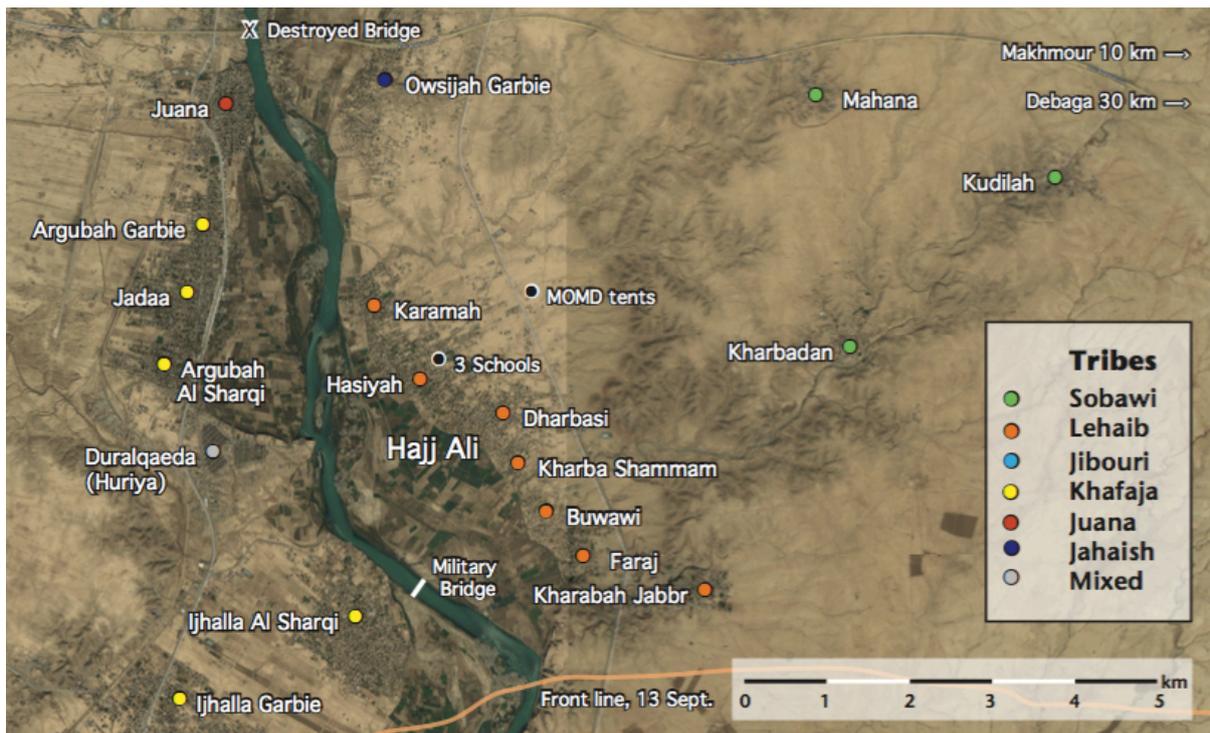
## Hajj Ali Returns & Mahana, 13 September

There has been an increase in IDP arrivals in Debaga from Hawija and Shirqat following warnings of the expected ISF offensive in these areas. There are also signs of increased returns from Debaga, particularly to Hajj Ali.

385 families (1,968 individuals) have returned to Hajj Ali so far. Around 2,500-3,000 families are expected to return in total. Families whose houses have been destroyed may choose not to return. A total of around 600 houses have been destroyed across the seven villages (450 by ISIS and 150 during the military operation).

Movements of IDPs between Debaga and Hajj Ali are now being organized by Falah Hassan Zeidan, the Minister of Agriculture and brother of Sheikh Merwan, the local sheikh in Hasiyah. When locals were asked why people are returning to Hajj Ali, three reasons were given: 1. To populate the villages to prevent ISIS from returning or infiltrating; 2. To bolster the ranks of the local Hashd, not only to act as a defence force but also to prevent a vacuum from developing in which the Shia Hashd might be able to exploit; 3. To resettle in their homes and start rebuilding their lives.

We have not come across any suggestions of forced returns to Hajj Ali from Debaga.



### IDP movements to and from Hajj Ali, 10 September

On 10 September 780 individuals from Hajj Ali returned from Debaga to their villages. At the same time around 500 IDPs from Shirqat, Hawija, and villages just south of Hajj Ali, who were residing at the 3 schools in Hasiyah, were transported to Debaga. It was originally thought by some that this movement might have been forced, but it has since become apparent that it was voluntary and many of these 500 IDPs had family members in Debaga with whom they wanted to be reunited.

### Further IDP movements to and from Hajj Ali

Numerous families were seen on the road to Hajj Ali, seemingly in transit. A truck load of arrivals (from Shirqat/Hawija?) was also seen moving towards Debaga. Six families were waiting with Hashd units at the entrance to Hasiyah – half were waiting for transport to Tinah, where they hoped to be given onward travel to Salahaldin, and the others were returning to Imam Garbie, a recently reclaimed village on the west bank of the Tigris. We may soon see returns from Tinah to this village.

The ISF have reported a number of IDPs walking from villages like Ka'anus and Shayalah, south of Hajj Ali, to ISF lines. They are security screened by the ISF and then usually transported to Debaga. They reportedly prefer to go to Debaga because they have heard that services will be available to them there and they fear the Hashd in Hajj Ali.

The schools in Hasiyah currently house just 15 families. RNIDP may soon change location to Kharabah Jabbr, where there are also three schools available.

### Planned returns for 17 September

A large movement of 1,000 families from Debaga to Hajj Ali is planned to take place on Saturday, 17 September. (It was originally planned for 15 September but obtaining approval from the security committee in Makhmour and the Asayish in Debaga has caused a delay). This movement is exclusively for IDPs from Hajj Ali, not other villages, although separate returns are likely to continue for other villages (for example, we have heard that 50 families will be returning to Mahana after Eid).

Fifteen buses have been booked to transport IDPs and MOMD have promised further assistance in transportation. The Iraqi Army may also offer assistance in this regard.

### Food and water supply

Falah Hassan Zeidan has reportedly pledged to supply enough food and water for a month for around 1,000 families, and has been supporting those already in Hajj Ali. Food supplies consists of flour, rice, sugar, tea, oil, tomato paste, salt, and yeast. Three large MOMD trucks arrived in Hasiyah on 13 September carrying 1,500 family food boxes, 1,500 stoves, and 1,500 clothes boxes. The boxes were being unloaded into a house belonging to Sheikh Merwan. It is unclear at the moment whether the food pledged by Falah Zeidan is the same or different to that supplied by MOMD (we were told that he is personally paying for the supplies that he provides). Food distribution is under the control of Sheikh Merwan and his brother Falah.

There is a mobile market that serves Hajj Ali on most days, mainly selling fresh produce brought from Makhmour. It is reportedly there to serve ISF stationed in Hajj Ali, but some civilians also benefit from it. Details regarding its size and reach among the returned community are not known.

The water plant in Hajj Ali is operating at about 50% capacity and is untreated. IDPs will still be mostly reliant on bottled water.

## Health

The health centre located between the schools in Hasiyah is reportedly open every day. There is a WHO ambulance and the centre is staffed by two local nurses, an assistant, and an ambulance driver, all employees of DoH. There is no doctor and therefore only minor ailments can be treated. Emergency cases are sent to Makhmour in the ambulance. When transport is available, medical cases from Qayyarah are sent to Hajj Ali because of the extreme lack of medical services on the west side of the river. Residents in Hajj Ali hoped that with greater numbers returning, a doctor might be permanently based in the area.

## Hashd al-Asha'ari

We were told that more than 3,000 young men returning to Hajj Ali will probably join the Hashd. As mentioned below, a portion of these will be below the age of 18. These local Sunni tribal forces run by the sheikhs are growing in reach and influence, and seemingly filling the defensive space behind the ISF lines and supporting/engaging in front line operations in some areas. Sheikh Nizhan (Luhaiab), Sheikh Ahmed (Jibouri) – both former Sahwa leaders – and Sheikh Mukdad (Sobawi, son of the late Sheikh Faris) come under the general umbrella of the PMF (Hashd al-Shaabi) and are funded within that structure by Baghdad. Sheikh Ahmed al Jibouri, an MP from Salahaldin, has recently received approval from Baghdad to raise a Hashd of 1,000 men from the local area (between Imam and Safina) on the west side of the Tigris. Sheikh Nizhan's forces have also attained GOI approval to operate in and from Qayyarah. The Sobawi Hashd is less active since the death of Sheikh Faris, its former leader, killed by an ISIS sniper in Al Nasr in March 2016. Other Hashd units are considered more defensive and operate primarily in their own local areas as a kind of guard force. Weapons for these defensive militias will either belong to the men themselves or be given by the sheikhs. There is no formal training for these men/boys and discipline is a major concern. However, there has been a strong push on recruitment in order to ensure there is no vacuum for Shia Hashd to operate in, as happened in Anbar. Disputes with the Kurds also restrict Shia Hashd from entering areas bordering the KR-I in this region.

## Child recruitment

When asked about child recruitment (numerous young Hashd members were seen throughout the day), local leaders were very open and honest. The basis of the justification centred on the perception of outsiders not matching the values of tribal, village communities. In such rural communities, when a boy reaches 13 years old he is considered a man. They were aware of how urban and western people perceive this but according to their culture, they are not doing anything wrong. Youths are not sent to frontlines to fight but normally kept behind the lines in supportive roles or just within the local community. It was impressed upon us that everyone is ready to fight ISIS and given what the people had been through, this really does mean everyone.

## Security in Hajj Ali

Although a level of IED/UXO clearance has been conducted by the ISF – primarily along main access routes – the area is still contaminated. A commander in the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade told us that his area of operations in Hajj Ali had been 100% checked and only two IEDs had been discovered. They had been marked for disposal, although it was not clear when disposal would take place. We were told that families wanting to return to houses in areas not fully cleared would be escorted by an ISF engineer team to check for contamination. However, with the return of civilians, no guarantee could be given that there would not be isolated incidents involving IEDs. IEDs take many forms: we were told of one consisting of two wires placed close together beneath a mattress. When

the mattress is sat upon, the wires touch, triggering the explosion.

Kharabah Jabbr, the most southern village in Hajj Ali, is less than a kilometer from the frontline. There was an IS attack here involving 2 SVBIEDs on 9 September which was repelled by ISF. No trench exists on this frontline but armoured vehicles and defensive posts are positioned at regular intervals. The line has not been breached and IS is rumoured to be weak in this area – three IS members surrendered recently and reported that more wanted to follow.

### Returns to Mahana

Mahana is located on the southern side of the Makhmour-Qayyarah road and had an original population of 150 families. Many houses are now occupied by ISF and IP and until recently the village was used as a base for heavy artillery. We were told that military personnel would be moving on shortly to Qayyarah and that their presence had been a chief reason for why there had not been any returns to Mahana up to this point.

On 7 September 10 families returned to Mahana from Debaga after the head of the Mosul Provincial Council (Mrs. Besma) toured Debaga camp telling people if they return to their villages they will be taken care of. The 10 families returned in their own vehicles, expecting NGO support. The only support so far has been from the ISF who they rely on solely for food and drinking water. There is a well for cleaning but no markets and electricity is only available from the ISF generator.

IEDs/UXOs are still in the village and this was a concern voiced by an IP captain regarding the return of civilians. The EOD team reportedly escorted returnees to their homes and cleared them. The family we talked to complained of restrictions of movement, stating they are unable to travel to Makhmour or surrounding villages for supplies.

50 more families are expected to return to Mahana from Debaga after Eid. Despite the challenging circumstances the family we spoke to much preferred the freedom of being back in their own homes than in Debaga. When asked if they felt their return was voluntary they agreed 100%.